DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 450 SP 036 206

TITLE	Poetry in and out of the Classroom: Essays from the ACLS Elementary and Secondary Schools Teacher Curriculum Development Project. ACLS Occasional Paper, No. 29.
INSTITUTION	American Council of Learned Societies, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	DeWitt Wallace / Reader's Digest Fund, Pleasantville, N.Y.; Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, PA.
REPORT NO	ISSN-1041-536X
PUB DATE	95
NOTE	61p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - General (020)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; Class Activities; *Curriculum Development; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; Females; Instructional Innovation; Oral History; *Poetry; *Poets; Scholarship; Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Developed Materials; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*American Council of Learned Societies; Foxfire; Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock (The); *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

This volume contains five essays on the uses of poetry and one poem by elementary and secondary teachers involved in a project to encourage teachers to develop the habit of scholarship as the basis for their teaching. In the first essay, "Female Poets of the First World War: A Study in Diversity for the Fifth Grade Social Studies Curriculum," Randy Cummings explains this little known body of poetry and demonstrates how to use it in the classroom. In "Ghosts Among Us/Ancestral Voices: 'What's Past is Prologue'" Terry Moreland Henderson draws on Foxfire oral history techniques to elicit a spectrum of oral histories from the diverse backgrounds of her Los Angeles (California) students. In "Poetry from the Far Side" Phyllis B. Schwartz uses a cartoon about adolescence in different species--a parallel to the differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds in many schools--to evoke poetry from students who denied interest in poetry and in sharing emotions in the classroom. "Sestina for a Grande Dame" by Fredric Lown is a poem, a memoir of Lown's grandmother. In "The Overwhelming Question: Integrating the ACLS Curriculum Project, 'Teaching for Understanding,' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" Joan Soble describes show teaching and relationships enrich her understanding of the traditional curriculum. In "A Matter of Trust" Richard Young analyzes "truth" in the writings of Robert Lowell, Alex Haley, and Malcolm X. (Most essays contain references.) (JB)

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POETRY IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM:

Essays from the ACLS Elementary and Secondary Schools Teacher Curriculum Development Project

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American Council of Learned Societies

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 29

ISSN 1041-536X

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Essays from the ACLS Elementary and Secondary Schools Teacher Curriculum Development Project

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ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 29

The ACLS Elementary and Secondary Schools Teacher Curriculum Development Project supports the teaching of the humanities in the public schools through a multi-dimensional effort centered on a national network of school district university collaboratives. A workshop at each collaborative site involves teacher-representatives of approximately a dozen schools and one or more university facilitators. Each workshop, as a unit, explores current methods and knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, each teacher-scholar works with their school-based team to produce curricular materials particularly appropriate for her own school. The university workshop facilitator provides access to the university's intellectual resources and develops mutually supportive relationships with the teacher-scholars and their school-based teams.

The summer of 1995 marks the end of the project's third year. There were four first-cycle (1992-93) sites: the Cambridge and Brookline public school districts with Harvard University; the Los Angeles Educational Partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles; the Minneapolis Public Schools with the University of Minnesota; and the San Diego City Schools with the University of California, San Diego. A fifth site was added for the second-cycle (1993-94), the Colorado Educational Partnership with the University of Colorado at Boulder, while the collaboration between the Brookline and Cambridge public schools and Harvard University continued. In the third year, two new sites were added: the Milwaukee Public Schools with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the British Columbia Consortium for Humanities and Social Sciences, a coalition of schools in the vicinity of Vancouver, with the University of British Columbia. Activities in Massachusetts and Colorado continued in 1995.

The project is supported by major funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and an anonymous funder, and matching and additional funding at sites from participating districts and universities, the Gates and JFM foundations in Colorado, and the Joyce Foundation in Milwaukee. The British Columbia Ministry of Education and the British Columbia Teachers Federation have contributed to the British Columbia site.

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Acknowledgments

In January 1994, the ACLS and The New Press, a non-profit publisher in the public interest, reached an agreement to coordinate editorial projects in education. This Occasional Paper is the first publication from this joint venture. Many thanks to the ACLS and The New Press for their support. Special thanks to Candace Frede, Managing Editor of ACLS Publications, for her superb and dedicated work on the design and production of this volume.

Ellen Reeves, Editor
The New Press/ACLS

Introduction

The schools initiatives of the American Council of Learned Societies are intended to assist teachers in developing the habit of scholarship as the basis for their teaching. The three-year ACLS Elementary and Secondary Schools Teacher Curriculum Development Project has provided fellowships for nearly one hundred teachers with that aim, and has involved perhaps another three or four hundred teachers across North America in school-based teams in work with the teacher fellows. We are very pleased with the results of the project, one manifestation of which is the essays included in this volume.

These essays illustrate the full range of what might be expected from an effort to encourage teachers in elementary schools and secondary schools to approach their work from the point of view of scholarship. Randy Cummings tells us about a little-known body of poetry, that of British women at the time of the First World War, and demonstrates how this work can be used in the Fifth Grade Social Studies curriculum. Mr. Cummings' scholarship is in the mainstream of current literary history, recovering for us a neglected aspect of our literary heritage. Terry Moreland Henderson brings her own heritage to bear on the development of student interest in their family stories. Working in the oral history tradition of the Foxfire project (itself strongly rooted in her ancestral Appalachia), Ms. Henderson is able to evoke a highly differentiated spectrum of oral histories from the extraordinarily diverse backgrounds of her Los Angeles students. Her concept of "panculturalism" is a provocative counter-weight to the more usual multicultural reference of new curriculum, perhaps a certain reversion to "melting pot" theory in a time when difference is increasingly emphasized over commonality in civil society. Similarly, using a "Far Side" cartoon about adolescence in different species—a parallel to the differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds in many of our schools—Phyllis Schwartz evokes moving and effective poetry from students who had characteristically denied interest in poetry and in sharing highly personal emotions in the classroom setting. Fredric Lown's contribution to this collection is itself a poem, a memoir of his grandmother, whose life foreshadowed those of many of the students in the Pacific Rim classes of Henderson and Schwartz. Joan Soble gives us a vivid account of how her teaching, and her relationships with colleagues and students, enrich her understanding of one of the chief canonical texts of the traditional curriculum, as she works to prepare it for presentation in the framework of her district's (and Harvard University's) "teaching for understanding" pedagogy. Finally, Richard Young gives us an account of his own reactions, as an informed reader,

to the presentations of "truth" in the poetry of Robert Lowell and the prose of Alex Haley and Malcolm X. After a year of post-modernist inquiry, Young finds the canons of modernism much less simple, the lessons of literature much more ambiguous.

After three years of work with schools, we can applaud these indications of the use to which their fellowship time has been put by these teachers, and note with them, and their colleagues, how scholarship can be successfully used as a basis for curriculum development in the elementary and secondary classrooms, in British Columbia and Colorado, as much as in Massachusetts and Wisconsin—everywhere, that is, where teachers have the opportunity to study current research in their subject areas and responsibility for creating their curriculum on that foundation.

Michael Holzman
Project Director

Female Poets of the First World War: A Study in Diversity for the Fifth Grade Social Studies Curriculum

Randy Cummings

Reexamining the Neglected Female Experience of War

The elementary school social studies curriculum is beginning to take seriously the requirements of social history. The single political narrative with its emphasis on events and personalities, or what Paul Veyne negatively refers to as a "history of treaties and battles," has shown itself incapable of conveying the complexities of an era or event (Kusch 170). In an effort to extend the parameters of their students' historical consciousness, teachers now routinely include art history, dramatic role playing, and literature in their social study lessons. These creative curricular practices are validated by wholistic learning, especially in reading the fictional writings of children, women, and minorities—groups which, for the most part, have been overlooked in the annals of traditional history.

Trying to make sense of such diversity requires the exercise of considerable historical imagination. An approach to the study of history is needed which fosters in students the ability to find meaning in a multiplicity of experiences without relying on any single unifying concept. History becomes a matter of inquiry and debate, of engaging students in the process of interpreting and synthesizing opposing discourses, and of understanding the reciprocal effect that the past and the present have on one another. Students who enter into a thoughtful dialogue with the past will, as Nietzsche put it, understand that a "vision of the past turns them toward the future, . . . kindles the hope that justice will yet come and happiness is behind the mountain they are climbing" (Nietzsche 10). Such a pronouncement on the need to inform the future with hope, means imparting to students the habits of intellect which allow them to question and overturn the authority of historical texts. The challenge becomes one of constructing new meaning in the light of recent discoveries. Believing that all historical research is a constructive endeavor François Furet writes:

> . . . today's historian must give up methodological naivety and think about the conditions under which historical knowledge is established . . . the mask of

> some kind of historical objectivity hidden in the 'facts' and discovered at the same time as them, has been removed for ever; the historian can no longer avoid being aware that he has constructed his 'facts' . . . (Furet 20)

Women's poetry of the First World War represents one of those recently exhumed discourses whose critical appreciation can do much to explicate the intricate social record of the period. An instructional unit devoted to this topic has been included in my revised fifth grade social studies curriculum project. The purpose is to show the ways in which a historical period is constituted through a multiplicity of forces, ideologies, and contradictions. Children begin to understand the effect the war had on a significant part of the population. As Frances Hallowes writes: "The sufferings of women through war . . . are seldom dwelt upon. Books and treaties dealing with . . . war almost invariably omit to mention the damage done to one half of the human race" (Khan 2). This observation, which Hallowes made in her book *Women and War* in 1914, anticipates our present need to broaden the scope of the regular social studies curriculum.

The emotional responses of the male combatants were well documented in the poetry of the soldier poets. Their journey from idealism to bitterness began with Rupert Brooks' sublime patriotic verse and ended in the angrily censured poetry of Sigfrid Sasson, Wilfred Owens, and Isaac Rosenberg. Women were also writing about their experiences of the war and documenting the transformations in their subjectivity with clarity and enthusiasm. Catherine W. Reilly's *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography*, identified 532 female poets within a larger field of 2,225 British war poets. Venues for women's poetry included newspapers, self-published pamphlets and inexpensive broadsheets intended for sale to a mass market (Reilly 1982, xxxiii).

Anthologies of war poetry did include female poets, but their contributions rarely received the same critical attention as those of their male colleagues. This biased assessment reflects the atavistic belief that war was the responsibility of men, and what women had to say on the subject was trivial and anecdotal. This becomes increasingly apparent in the vogue for verse written by the soldier poets. Galloway Kyle's *Soldier Poets* (1916; second series 1917) and E. B. Osborns's *The Muse in Arms* (1917) were important anthologies in the canonization of poetic taste, and in perpetuating the myth of a single war narrative comprised of the heroic and courageous deeds of the "fighting men" (Hibberd and Onions 3). It was only with the advent of Women's Studies that the critical

apparatus of the Academy began to examine the multiple view-points of female poets. What emerges is a complex narrative chronicling women's responses to the exigencies of the war, from the romantic and jingoistic to the growing militancy of the politically discontent.

The Themes of Women's War Poetry: A Diverse Sampling

The varied and complex female experience of the First World War finds expression in the poetry women were writing throughout the conflict. Any attempt to see women as preternaturally compassionate and tender-hearted maintains a pattern of subtle discrimination and inequality. Even a brief survey of the major themes in women's war poetry discourages the reader from imagining there could be anything resembling a monolithic female experience of the war. What this means for students is that a number of accessible avenues into the complex social structures of the First World War are now open to them.

This is not to assign grades of high meaning to men's poetry and low meaning to women's poetry. The difference in meaning resides in the use of metaphors and not solely in a sex/gender distinction. Female poets tended to use the traditional metaphors of departing husbands and dead sons and brothers to express feelings of loss and sorrow, images which children are capable of responding to with a degree of authentic understanding. The soldier poets, on the other hand, objectified their overwhelming sense of grief in verse laden with graphic descriptions of the war's atrocities.

The poetic productions of women during the First World War encompassed the entire political spectrum from patriotic fervor to pacifistic opposition. Female poets were writing the same popular jingoistic verse as their male colleagues, but they were also capable of rivaling the best efforts of such soldier poets as Sasson, Owens, and Rosenberg—the recognized masters of realistic unsentimentalized war verse. Women were now in a position to offer a stringent critique of the institutionalized belief that females relate to the world through subjective love relationships while males find purpose and meaning through their superior pragmatic intellects. This sexist pronouncement can be seen in Georgette Agnew's 1914 poem "The Mother" (Khan 156): "Men live/ In every noble word and deed/ More than in flesh . . . / Ah! mothers need those smiles and eyes."

Trembling females begging for protection from stalwart males were popular images at the beginning of the war, but the horrors of the Western Front did much to subvert the idea of specific gender-based

responses. Male combatants writing emotionally charged love elegies to dead comrades was a common poetic trope for the soldier poet. Ivor Gurney, who survived the trenches only to slip into total madness in 1922, eulogized his fallen comrade in the poem "To His Love" (Lehman 90):

He's gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswolds
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of membered flowers—
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.

In their capacity as nurses and field ambulance drivers female poets quickly dispelled the myth of their "natural hysteria." Recovering the dead and wounded from the battlefield as well as tending the sick and dying in hospitals were responsibilities managed to a large extent by women. Their intimate knowledge of suffering and death influenced women to write verse stripped of the sentimental and jingoistic. Winifred M. Letts, a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse (V.A.D.), describes in her poem "Screens (In a Hospital)" a scene she must have witnessed on numerous occasions (Reilly 1982, 62). A dying soldier treated with hushed deference expires unseen behind the obligatory red screens:

They put the screens around his bed;
a crumpled heap I saw him lie,
White counterpane and rough dark head,
those screens—they showed that he would die.

They put the screens about his bed;
We might not play the gramophone,
And so we played at cards instead
And left him dying there alone.

The covers on the screen are red,
The counterpanes are white and clean;
He might have lived and loved and wed
But now he's done for at nineteen.

An ounce or more of Turkish lead,
He got his wounds at Sulva Bay
They've brought the Union Jack to spread
Upon him when he goes away.

He'll want those three red screens no more,
Another man will get his bed,
We'll make the row we did before
But—Jove!—I'm sorry that he's dead.

For the female poet, the hospital was the site where care giving and indignation met to constitute an important new sub-genre of war poetry. In many ways our collective memory of that entire hospital experience of the First World War can be reconstructed in the writings of the female poet nurses. Deep feelings of frustration and anger abound in the sentimental images they used to protest the incomprehensible suffering of the soldiers in their charge. In "Night Duty" Eva Dobell evokes feelings of compassion and pity in her description of the hospitalized soldiers she encountered daily as a V.A.D. (Reilly 1982, 32):

The pain and laughter of the day are done,
So strangely hushed and still the long ward seems,
Only the Sister's candle softly beams.
Clear from the church near by the clock strikes 'one';
And all are wrapt away in secret sleep and dreams.

. . . .

Here one cries sudden on a sobbing breath,
Gripped in the clutch of some incarnate fear:
What terror through the darkness draweth near?
What memory of carnage and of death?
What vanished scenes of dread to his closed eyes appear?

And one laughs out with an exultant joy.
An athlete he—Maybe his young limbs strain
In some remembered game, and not in vain
To win his side the goal—Poor crippled boy,
Who in the waking world will never run again.

. . . .

Sarah Macnaughton came to know the violence of the war intimately while serving in a hospital unit in Belgium and France from 1914 until her death in 1916. In her book *My War Experiences in Two Continents*—

published posthumously in 1919—Macnaughton condemns the savagery of trench warfare:

> It is madness to slaughter these thousands of young men. Almost at last, in a rage, one feels inclined to cry out against the sheer imbecility of it. Why bring lives into the world and shell them out of it with jagged pieces of iron, and knives thrust through their quivering flesh? The pity of it is all too much. I am sick with seeing suffering. (Khan 109)

While many female poets were attempting to deal with the madness of the war in realistic verse, there were those poets whose propagandistic intentions glorified death in battle. Constance Ada Renshaw typifies the latter group in her desire to attach a higher moral purpose to the war. Her romantic sonnet "The Noble Height" compares the waste and ruin of the trenches to the chivalric adventures of a medieval knight (Khan 13). The nobility of war and the honor of suffering and dying in a great moral contest reflect the kind of naive patriotism that popular poets used to glorify the war.

> He tossed his shield in the bleak face of Fate;
> He dreamed of riding out on splendid quests,
> Threading dim forests . . .
> Thundering at some foeman's stubborn gate.
> His heart throbbed like a sea. Romance was great
> In him. His soul was lustful of red war;
>
> . . . .
>
> Desires are fled, dreams richly sacrificed;
> Romance ebbs with his blood into the night
>
> . . . .

The metaphor of the soldier as medieval knight enjoyed great popularity throughout the war. Its strong association with the traditional male virtues of endurance and self-sacrifice made explicit its association with the righteousness of the national war effort. The lone knight confronting some mythical beast of menacing size appeared on the propaganda posters of all the belligerent nations. It quickly became the recognized signifier of the national psyche in its struggle against the enemy as embodied evil. Utilizing the image of the knight Katherine Tynan romanticizes the horrors of the war in her poem "New Heaven" of 1915 (Foxcroft 148):

Paradise now has many a Knight,
Many a lordkin, many lords,
Glimmer of armor, dinted and bright,
The young Knights have put on new swords.

Some have barely the down on the lip,
Smiling yet from the new-won spurs,
Their wounds are rubies, glowing and deep,
Their scars amethyst-glorious scars.

Michael's army hath many new men,
Gravest Knights that may sit in stall
Kings and Captains, a shining train,
But the little young Knights are dearest of all.

Paradise now is the soldiers land
Their own country its shining sod,
Comrades all in a merry band;
And the young Knights' Laughter pleaseth God.

Renshaw and Tynan's commitment to the rhetoric of patriotism indicate their willingness to accept patriarchy's prescribed categories of behavior. Portrayed as selfless wives and mothers or as faithful "sweethearts" women continued to signify all that was worth fighting for and comforting about one's homeland. Their poems achieved sentimental effects by casting women as the helpless uninformed victims of political events far beyond their understanding. Winfred M. Letts' "The Call to Arms In our Street" takes up the theme of the physically and emotionally restrained woman (Foxcroft 33):

There's a woman sobs her heart out,
With her head against the door,
For the man that's called to leave her,
—God have pity on the poor!
But its beat, drums, beat
While the lads march down the street,
And its blow, trumpets blow,
Keep your tears until they go.

There's a crowd of little children
That march along and shout,

For it's fine to play at soldiers
Now their fathers are called out.
So its beat, drums, beat;
But who'll find them food to eat?
And its blow, trumpets, blow,
Oh, its little children know.

There's a mother who stands watching
For the last look of her son,
A worn poor widow woman,
And he her only one,
But its beat, drums, beat,
Though God knows when we shall meet;
And its blow trumpets, blow
We must smile and cheer them so.

There's a young girl who stands laughing
For she thinks a war is grand
And it's fine to see the lads pass,
And it's fine to hear the band,
So its beat, drums, beat,
To the fall of many feet;
And its blow, trumpets, blow,
God go with you where you go.

The theme of the emotionally fragile woman finds its ultimate expression in the pathos-filled sub-genre of the grieving mother. The anguish mothers endured in sending their sons off to war or in burying them found ample expression in the poetry of the period. Poetry dedicated to the suffering mother attempted to make sense of the massacre of a generation of women's young sons, but its popularity as a poetic trope had significance far beyond that of simple national catharsis. It had something basic to say about the position of women in a society which desperately required the preservation of the myth of the long suffering woman mother figure in order to continue the war. Blanche Adelaide Brock is representative of a large group of jingoistic female writers who celebrated, in high-blown patriotic verse, the sorrows of grieving women as the noble trophies of national pride. The imperialist tone of those fervently patriotic female writers clearly reveals itself in Brock's "British Mothers" (Khan 153):

For she was formed of British Mould
And never would have known content

Had her son not his aid have lent
To save his country's honor, as brave sons of old.

He was her All, and ill too,
But for her country's Faith and Truth
She bravely helped him to prepare
To face the foe, and bear his share
Of hardships, and of Glory, like true British youth.

May Herschel-Clarke's 1917 poem "The Mother" is a melancholy reverie about the fate of a distant son (Hibberd and Onions 121). The mournful elegiac tone of the poem is typical of the verse written to memorialize the sorrows of grieving mothers, but the conventions of the poetic form required a grateful acknowledgment of the son's untimely death, received and offered up by the mother on the altars of nationalism.

Written after reading Rupert Brooke's sonnet, "The Soldier":

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.

If you should die, think only this of me
In that still quietness where is space for thought,
Where parting, loss and bloodshed shall not be,
And men may rest themselves and dream of nought:
That is some place a mystic mile away
One whom you loved has drained the bitter cup
Till there is nought to drink; has faced the day
Once more, and now, has raised the standard up.

And think, my son, with eyes grown clear and dry
She lives as though for ever in your sight,
Loving the things you loved, with heart aglow
For country, honour, truth, traditions high,
Proud that you paid their price. (And if some night
Her heart should break—well, lad, you will not know.)

Why the suffering mother theme should persist in popularity requires a complex polemical response. The reverence owed maternity as the source of life was easily transferable in the popular imagination to the state in its capacity as the progenitor of political life. Louis Raemaekers,

an American political cartoonist of the First World War, conveys the strong sense of nationalism contained in the figure of woman in a charming 1917 drawing. Columbia, the personification of America, embraces her older sister Marianne, as the symbolic representation of France, with the caption "When I Was A Child It Was You Who Saved Me."

American women made significant contributions to the poetic discourse of war, but their poetry has always been considered adjunct to British women's war verse. Why this should be the case has to do not only with the relative dearth of American women's poetry, but also with America's physical and emotional distance from England's horrific and prolonged suffering. After 1917, the poetic forms American writers used either to praise or condemn the war had already been thoroughly exploited by British writers. The American writer Ruth Comfort Mitchell stresses the division that existed between the fighting men's brutal reality and the sentimental deceptions of the civilians in her poem "He Went For A Soldier" (Reilly 1982, 75):

He marched away with a blithe young score of him
With the first volunteers,
Clear-eyed and clean and sound to the core of him,
Blushing under the cheers.
They were fine, new flags that swung a flying there,
Oh, the pretty girls he glimpsed a-crying there,
Pelting him with pinks and with roses—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

Soon he is one with the blinding smoke of it—
Volley and curse and groan;
Then he has done with the knightly joke of it—
It's rending flesh and bone.
There are pain-crazed animals a-shrieking there
And a warm blood stench that is a-reeking there,
He fights like a rat in a corner—
Billy the Soldier Boy!

There he lies now, like a ghoulish score of him,
Left on the field for dead;
The ground all around is smeared with the gore of him—
Even the leaves are red.
The Thing that was Billy lies a-dying there,
Writhing and a-twisting and a-crying there:

A sickening sun grins down on him—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

. . .

Being so far removed from the trenches allowed American women the luxury of examining the war with a kind of intellectual remoteness. Their intention was to reach the center of absolute understanding through the metaphysical contemplation of nature. Sara Teasdale's 1918 poem "There Will Come Soft Rains" written in 1918 takes up the theme of nature's disinterest in the affairs of warring nations (Reilly 1982, 110):

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows calling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild-plum trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Readers Making Meaning: From Response to Interpretation

Is it really possible to have children understand the dynamics of a historical period by reading its poetry? For children teetering on the brink of adolescence, their intellectual and emotional development predisposes them to a symbolic exploration of the world through their passions. David Bleich believes that the subjectivity of literary responses precedes the seemingly objective analysis of a work: "The separation of conscious judgment from its subjective roots is false and artificial" (Bleich 49). Within this context of "selfish" motivation the poem affords students the opportunity to articulate their feelings and judgments about experiences outside their ego-restricted view of reality. Wordsworth speaks

eloquently of the power poetry possess to moves us beyond ourselves:

> All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing . . . its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from he same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature. . . . (Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 360)

The benefits of linking literature with history are most apparent in a student's ability to bring to bear a number of viewpoints on a single topic. This means that the poem must be seen as something other than a mere body of knowledge waiting to be imparted; that its real worth lies in its ability to elicit responses from students regarding the biases and flow of history. By honoring the significance of the student's experience with the text, the past loses its fixity in time and reveals itself as the undeniable corollary of the present.

Jessie Pope's "The Call," read by my fifth-graders as an example of jingoistic verse, provoked their responses to the difficulties of chauvinistic loyalty and patriotism during war time—issues about which students have opinions (Reilly 1982, 88):

Who's for the trench—
  Are you, my laddie?
Who'll follow French—
  Will you, my laddie?
Who's freeting to begin?
Who's going out to win?
And who wants to save his skin—
  Do you, my laddie?

Who's for the khaki suit—
  Are you, my laddie?
Who longs to charge and shoot—
  Do you, my laddie?
Who's keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who'd rather wait a bit—
  Would you, my laddie?

Who'll earn the Empire's thanks—
  Will you, my laddie?
Who'll swell the victor's ranks—
  Will you, my laddie?
When that procession comes,
Banners and rolling drums—
Who'll stand and bite his thumbs—
  Will you, my laddie?

I asked the following questions:

1. If you knew beforehand what a terrible place the trenches were, do you think you would be excited about going there?

2. Do you think those young men who were afraid to go to France to fight were unpatriotic or cowardly? What does patriotic mean? What does cowardly mean?

3. In line eleven, the poet makes it sound like fun to be charging into battle shouting and shooting. What do you think your response might be in a similar situation?

4. In line fifteen, the poet describes the embarrassment those men who refused to fight will feel when the returning soldiers are greeted with "banners and rolling drums." What do you think the soldier might be feeling while marching in a victory parade? What do you think the soldier might say to the man who never enlisted, or vice versa?

Armed with a reading of the poem that was fuller and more thoroughly reasoned, students began the process of interpretation. Before this unit, the political story of the war had been balanced by a fairly comprehensive examination of the artistic productions—architecture, painting, sculpture, music and dance—of all the belligerent nations. This experience prepared students for their final task of analyzing the poetry, by this time sufficiently interpellated with a certain amount of social meaning. The goal was to have students see the poem functioning symbolically—that is, to trigger responses in their minds. Reading women's poetry opens up the story of the First World War to the variety of student responses, and shows them that the complexities of the period cannot be restricted to a single political narrative.

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Randy Cummings is an elementary school art specialist with undergraduate and graduate degrees in Classics and Art History. Diverse experiences, from teaching Latin in a private school to being a university fine arts slide curator, preceded his present public school position. The cultural life of the twentieth century has always been of special interest to him. He was a 1993-94 ACLS teacher fellow.

Ghosts Among Us/Ancestral Voices: "What's Past is Prologue"

Terry Moreland Henderson

For my ACLS curricular project, I chose the unifying framework of storytelling to allow students to research their family past, because while working on another of my projects, an autobiographical novella, I realized that the liberation that I felt in writing some of my stories was and is something that I wanted to share with my students. My memory may be all that keeps my beloved Mt. Misery, the hill on the Ohio farm where I grew up, Deersville Ridge, and those Post-Depression years alive. I feel that I must tell my stories in order to preserve the culture of a dying people. Because I remember, it is my duty to preserve my mother's (and others') stories via written communication. (She is 86 years old and her link to a past which will never ever be again is something too valuable to allow to be lost.) This sense of importance is what I hope also to convey to my students so that they realize that they and their personal experience do indeed matter.

My project provides a way of bringing students' academic studies into focus by giving the students a common task which has outcomes which are individually unique to each student. Through the stories which they write and share with each other, bridges of understanding may be built, even though each story showcases individual and cultural differences. Ideally, the project promotes healing within familial, cultural, and societal structures and leads to student pride, bonding with classmates, and student empowerment. This project reflects the students' year-long studies by enabling them to synthesize material reflective of the many cultures that they have encountered throughout the year with a practical and fun inquiry into their own cultural and family background and personal experience. The unit is instructive in autobiography, personal narrative and oral interviewing skills. Students are asked to interview an older family member in order to ascertain information for a family tree as well as to glean family "legends." Students further develop research skills with their search for an origin myth peculiar to their culture. The final project culminates with a videotape of student presentations, which blends myth, history, and personal history into a creative presentation. I introduce the project early in the second semester so that students can have the time to contact geographically distant relatives if they so choose. Work on the project is interspersed with other course work until the final month of the semester, when the work becomes more intense

and involved. Assessment is based on their oral presentation, which is accompanied by a written summary as well as an artistic representation of their story. Such a unit aims at enhancing the individual student's self-esteem by giving him a context within which to place his sense of both a personal and a cultural self.

I myself am of Appalachian descent, and, having attended Oberlin College as an Equal Opportunity student in the early seventies, relate quite strongly to the culture shock so eloquently described by Richard Rodriguez in his essay "Scholarship Boy." I have always considered myself a member of a minority since, in fact, I am a cultural minority, but my students sometimes have a difficult time grasping the fact that white people can also be minorities. Part of my individual ACLS project, as mentioned before, was to immerse myself in Appalachian literature and sociology while I worked on my own novella. As I began to write my stories, I felt free as I began to find my own voice; in my own experience, there is a great deal of shame associated with my family stories of poverty; no running water; no heat; privation; privation, and more privation—and on and on and on.

Now, as an adult, I have finally begun to realize that much of that experience has made me a strong and independent person, and, furthermore, makes for good reading. Then, I felt different and was ashamed of that difference; now, I feel special and I cherish my difference. It is this perspective that I hope to help my students achieve since they really have so many special needs. While watching the student presentations, I saw previously silent kids who became enamored with others' stories and eager to share their own. One boy, in particular, Eric, had been practically mute all year long; given this opportunity to speak of his family history, it became almost impossible to silence him—not that I would have wanted to. Almost every day of the project he would come to class with some new tidbit he had learned the night before; but as much as he told us, he still saved the story with the most impact for his presentation. He showed us a picture of "not your ordinary old truck, but a two ton dump truck" which ran over one of his grandmother's children. Miraculously, that child lived without a bruise, and as he held us mesmerized , he continued: "And today I call that child Mama". His sense of timing was impeccable, his style eloquent; clearly, I had failed earlier to tap into this rich vein of material. At this point, my job is to help Eric to translate his oral skills into writing skills. One might question what all of this has to do with English class. My premise is that if we begin with oral traditions, we can then learn to write some of those traditions down before they disappear. Furthermore, students become motivated to write in order to preserve their cultural and personal identity. I feel successful

in that they are finding a common ground, a way to speak, while at the same time they are preserving their differences, those things which make them unique. Perhaps the most valuable lesson that I may teach my students is to respect each other and themselves; they don't have to necessarily like each other, but I do insist that "they all get along."

The Genesis, Clarification and Working Definition of the Term Panculturalism

While working on my project with the students, I coined the term "panculturalism" to describe what it was that our project attempted to capture. Our humanity provides our common link—ideally, our "humaneness" (which is learned) allows us to listen to and respect, or, at the very least, tolerate, each other — while we hold with pride our individual personal and cultural differences. Panculturalism is in no way a return to the melting pot theory: difference is celebrated, not extinguished. I have long been disturbed by the term multiculturalism as well as the study of multiculturalism in the way it is currently practiced. Inherent in the term itself is a prefix which allows for, and even invites, a "splintering effect" and de facto exclusiveness. While I realize that the original intent of multiculturalism was an expansion of the canon, and not necessarily an alternative or replacement canon, I feel ultimately that a canon which speaks of inclusion should not be so ironically exclusive. Further, the argument that since "the canon was so one-sided for so long, it only makes sense historically that it swing the other way" before finally transcending the political arena which thrives on assertions of difference and mocks all efforts at compromise, seems extremely shallow to me. My belief is that art transcends the political and that every artistic act is ultimately artistic, not political, as some argue, as we constantly create and reinvent our multiplicity of selves. It always surprises me that those scholars who admonish me with their notions of the pendulum swings of history are paradoxically the first to quote Santayana's off-repeated rationale for the study of history: to paraphrase, we learn history so as not to be condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past. I further assert that we write history; we are history; we are active participants, not passive victims. Two wrongs will never make a right. As I watched buildings burn from my daughters' bedroom two Aprils ago during the L.A. riots and heard the incessant wail of the fire trucks, I imagined what Francis Scott Key must have felt when he composed "The Star Spangled Banner" in the midst of the Revolutionary War. At that moment, I knew that I would do all that I could to help my students heal and recover so

that that particular mistake of history would not recur. We need to teach cultural tolerance, but we must be sure to use templates of instruction which will encompass all cultures so as not to create frictions among cultures.

My project aimed at helping students break out of their defensive cocoons, to ultimately break the cycle of violence which surrounds us all. I proposed the term panculturalism for our endeavor with the hope that it would help us to begin to heal as a human culture. The prefix "pan-" is, according to Webster's, a combining form which means "all, of, comprising or uniting, every." Panculturalism is a term, then, which unifies and spans all cultures while maintaining individual cultural differences. It is inclusive, whereas multiculturalism has become exclusive and divisive in its political ramifications. The term "panculturalism" seeks to transcend the "us vs. them" mentality which is all too pervasive in today's world. The word "pan" has many other definitions; one particular definition has analogous qualities which work quite nicely with my definition. When the camera pans for an all-encompassing shot in a movie, it takes in the whole scene; it embraces all instead of selecting the so-called most important element of the scene. Think what a student who is not represented by one of the cultures included in a multicultural study must feel like. Panculturalism would let him/her know that he/she also belongs.

Panculturalism allows for the study of minority cultures such as Appalachian, gay, and elderly, to name just a few. In a true learning environment, we all learn from each other—teacher learns from student, student from teacher and other students. I choose to hear my students' voices more often and more clearly as a result of my year-long study, but never by sacrificing my own—something which multicultural studies seemed to want to force me to give up or devalue. I dare not be so immodest as to consider myself a martyr. We are all important; we are all human, and if we continue to devalue and deny our own cultures in an attempt to balance the inequities of history, we are not evolving. We are only engaging in what amounts to academic revenge; no real learning can take place, I believe, in a hostile environment where one's politics are deemed more important than one's individuality and selfhood.

From Cultural Diversity To Pancultural Unity

I am asked the question: "How do you get the kids to trust you, to open up?" I'm not exactly sure if there is a single answer to that question, but

I know that by letting down some of my barriers, I encourage them to do the same. I believe that by sharing some of my family stories—which not only highlight those items of which I am proud, but also, and even more importantly, those parts of my background by which I am ashamed—I make it less threatening and frightening for my sudents to do the same. It is and was extremely difficult for me to share my personal background. I've survived as a "closet Appalachian" for years while I allowed myself to be defined by my scholastic achievements and interests. Even though I often share my ancestry with my students, I lacked the courage to share this knowledge with my colleagues. Hence, my ACLS presentation at Rancho Mirage in June 1993 was truly "a coming out" for me and I felt great relief. In fact, I was amazed at the positive attention I received and the fact that so many of the people at the conference began to tell me similar stories. By giving students this opportunity to share a part of themselves and providing them with my own personal model, I feel that I helped open a door for them to purge, to exorcise, some of the ghosts which haunted them and rendered them powerless and voiceless. I adamantly believe that shame robs a person of his full power and potential, thus lowering self-esteem and increasing fear and defensiveness, qualities which can lead to volatile emotional situations. With liberation comes empowerment.

The first year I did this project, we made collages to illustrate our family stories and cultural myths. I have two very touching observations:

- These students wanted so much to share a part of themselves and their families that they trusted me with photos of which there was only one copy to take to the National Conference at Rancho Mirage. They wanted the people at the conference to hear their individual and joint voices. Some even wanted me to bring personal artifacts of great value, but I decided against such a risk.
- The video that we made conveys the enthusiasm with which the students tackled a very time-consuming project. Some students sent messages to distant rancheros in Mexico because their relatives had no telephones. This effort shows the seriousness with which they undertook the project. I was also captivated by what students chose to share and show, and by the respect that they gave their fellow students when those students were presenting. A pin could have been heard if dropped—not the usual situation in my classroom. I was deeply impressed by their courage and their honesty for I know how difficult it can be to share onself openly. I also know that honesty is what allows us all to heal.

Perhaps the most successful of all my dissemination efforts has been the work I modeled for my UCLA student teacher, Nancy Jeong, in the spring semester of 1994, one year after the original design of the project.

Because student presentations from the previous year tended to be quite lengthy, we determined that for the third phase of the project, the personal response, the students should write and share a poem. Some of the poems appear below.

I am currently preparing to introduce the project to yet another group of eleventh grade American Literature students. Instruction trends seem to have changed in the last two years. Many of the issues that worried me regarding the narrow "politically correct" focus of a multicultural studies course, which eliminated many cultures, most noticeably "the dead white guys," now seem to be non-issues as more and more teachers begin to advocate teaching comparatively. I am relieved that this change has occurred, is occurring even as I write, and feel strongly that such a teaching approach is the most effective. This approach is the one that I have always used somewhat, but almost exclusively since my ACLS fellowship year. When my eleventh graders study the Civil War era and before, their lessons are enriched by the materials I acquired on the African-American spiritual and slave narratives. My Assistant Principal, an African-American woman who is extremely well-versed in this subject area, comes to my classroom and speaks with the students about the spiritual, while sharing some of her own musical arrangements. When my students learn that I know about the legend of La Llorona and can identify La Malinche, my credibility "stock" rises a few points. I often overhear several say with amazement, "She really does know." When I teach La Llorona in a comparative context with Medea, students become even more grounded and are pleasantly surprised that one of their cultural stories has similarities with that of another culture. This awareness of universality is what allows people to listen and learn from one another. Students begin to realize that the pieces of the puzzle do sometimes fit together when they see the interrelationships between cultures. The Ancestral Voices project explores these relationships.

The Old Woman at the Off-Ramp

Buy my oranges
Buy my flowers
I have been standing
For hours and hours.
My arms are weak
And I need a rest,
I have two fives
For change, at best.
Why do you not look
At me when you pass?
Do you want me to
Mow your grass?
Could it be you know
Not who I am,
But you know I'm
Not a Nam veteran.
My arms grow tired
My legs do too,
How much I hunger
For a bit of food.
You roll down your window
To give me money,
But I'm not taking
Donations, honey.
I'm not the guy holding
The cardboard sign,
I don't spend my
Time at the county line.
I'm just standing here
Selling mis cacaguates,
Vendiendo, vendiendo
Las naranjas y flores

Tomas Montalvo

Me Myself and I

A man, a boy
Unsure of who he is
Yet strong in his heritage.

Upon looking in the mirror,
He sees a rich, vast,
Exciting culture flowing, surging,
Through his veins.

Yet, others who look at him,
Know not of who he is.
Label him with falsities,
Albino for one.

When he tells of his German heritage
Some garb him in a Nazi uniform
And a swastika on his arm.
With others, it goes in one ear
And out the other.

Then he tells them of his Swedish heritage
That shows so vividly in his face, his hair,
His eyes and his skin.

He is slightly saddened when
He tells of Norse legends and myth.
All the while the listener stares blankly
As if not comprehending.
His words fall upon deaf ears.

So he looks around, for someone
Unique as he, his search seeming endless
For he cannot find such a unique
Person in this diverse sea.

Sean Biedler

I Blossom from the Soil of my Roots

I am like a blossom
With petals of different shades
This gets very confusing
Like a rabbit who has laid eggs.

As I grow old and start to wilt
I begin to wonder which color's the strongest?
Which way will I tilt?
Will I be with the reds?
Or the purples and blues?
This blood is so far dead!
I think I'll start fresh and new!

I become a flower all of my own
I know where I'll land!
And I'll call America my new home!

Here is where my roots will sink
Here is where I'll no longer think
About who I am and where I belong
Because now there's America—my very own song!

Odessa Bowden

FIRST HERE
THEN THERE
NOW NOWHERE
NEAR

LEFT THERE
PAST HERE
NOW GONE

BACK AGAIN
UNEASY STILL
SHOVE, SHOVE, SHOVE

SAD
UNHAPPY
ENCLOSED
THERE'S NO WAY OUT

BACK AGAIN
NEVER
DO I WANT TO
GO AGAIN

Chanel McNair

Differences

On my paper, different colors are thought of as beautiful.

Diversity made it complete.

In my bowl, mixture is thought of as wonderful,

Something they couldn't wait to eat.

So how come in this world it seems like my difference is made out to be something wrong?

When difference is quickly accepted in clothes, art, views, even song?

There aren't many things I do different from you, the difference is just what you see.

Whenever you view me with unbiased eyes will we live our lives equally.

Nakita Crenshaw

Sitting down and thinking,
I see myself happily running
along the Caribbean Sea among
my family and friends.

Remembering the way it use to
be, the way I lived freely
in a friendly small town.

Now, striving to finish my education
I wait anxiously for the day
to come when I'll get to
run along the seashore once more.

I close my eyes realizing that
I learned to love and value my
country now that I'm millions of miles away.

Lila Constanza

My World

The streets are cold,
Neighborhoods can get lonely
People that I know won't recognize me
On the streets.

I have traveled long journeys to get where I am at.
In a whole new world, a different life,
But it is my own.

Poverty all around, loneliness
Walking in and out my door
Friends that I love won't see me anymore.

I walk the streets with no shame on myself.
I carry on my shoulders a load that will always be there.

My ancestors could have been kings,
Yours could have been governors,
But in this world the present and the future
Should be more important.
That is the reason we need to get along.

Farington Briones

Terry Moreland Henderson is a teacher of English and Humanities at University High School in West Los Angeles, where she is Humanitas Coordinator. An advocate of Joseph Carroll's Copernican Plan for American Schools, Ms. Henderson is a leading activist in the movement to implement this curricular reform at her school. She was a 1992-93 ACLS teacher fellow.

Reflections on Lives Past

Fredric Lown

During the autumn of 1994, I was a full-time ACLS fellow immersed in studies of Shakespearean tragedy, the Harlem Renaissance, and poetry. It was, however, the life and work of Langston Hughes that was and still is my major study of interest.

Although a familiar name to me in August, Langston Hughes was still a stranger. By January he had become a close acquaintance. As I read about his childhood in Missouri, Kansas, and Ohio, I thought about my own. As I read his accounts of his grandmother and the influence she had on him, I reflected on my own grandmother and the imprint she had made on my psyche. As I read his poetry, I began to write my own. A by-product of my studies of Langston Hughes has been an exploration of my own roots.

My paternal grandparents and father immigrated to this country in the mid-1930s from Lithuania. My grandparents were in their early forties when they left everybody and everything but for their immediate family and a few personal belongings. Almost everyone they left was murdered by the Nazis or by Lithuanian fascists. My grandparents were married for sixty-five years until my grandfather's death in 1885. My grandmother lived for another seven years in grace and dignity. "Sestina for a Grande Dame" is dedicated to her memory.

Sestina for a Grande Dame

She was always the Grande Dame of our family
realm, ruling from the regal heights of a former world.
It was vanishing, she feared, so she tried to focus
our mundane visions on allegories and stories,
(of her uncle from Berlin who bought her trousseau), giving power
to her claims that she was a voice in our lives.

We knew her in our life, not the many lives
she had already lived with her family
in cities and villages and towns where the power
resided in an affluent language our world
does not speak and will not learn so stories
remain buried beneath layers of lenses out of focus.

She commanded through her presence that the present focus
on the past, that her children's children's lives
remember their heritage through her stories
about a time when sacrifice secured family
values of unity and spirituality in a world
that was losing its center through its abuse of power.

We understood that her source of power
was in her uncanny ability to focus
our sights, if only fleetingly, into her world
of backs bent over books and female hands with lives
of their own encircling candles that gave light to family
memory collectively created to pass on her stories.

She never forgot a detail as she sifted stories
like sand through hands that had once held power
in a Polish shtetl on the German border where her family
life centered around her holy father whose prayers focused
on searching eyes imprisoned in gaunt bodies and tattered lives,
but his attentions rested on her. He was her world.

We were humbled by her blend of the simple with her world
wiseness that yielded recipes for stories
so rich in taste that our own lives
became bland, not by her design, by our loss of power
in a culture committed to sound-bites of unfocused
rage compelling us to seek solace in our family.

She regaled us with fables of her old world family
but pierced our souls with poignant stories focusing
her breath on her second life and giving power to our lives.

Fredric Loun

Fredric Loun has taught English, Drama, and Social Studies for over 20 years in the Randolph and Brookline, MA, public schools. With poet Judith Steinbergh, he is co-authoring a two-volume text/anthology on teaching poetry to youth, to be published in the spring of 1996 by J. Weston Walch of Portland, ME. He was a 1994-95 ACLS fellow.

Poetry from the Far Side

Phyllis B. Schwartz

Preface
March 3, 1994

Upon revisiting "Poetry from the Far Side," first published in the *English Journal* in December 1994, I could see the impact that my ACLS fellowship year had on the framework of my teaching practice. I have always endeavored to create a secure environment in which students could freely explore and develop new skills and ideas without fears about their awkwardness. And while I have worked with students to set boundaries for a class code that fosters inclusivity, I am still frustrated by some of the classroom sociology beyond my control.

Students bring to the classroom an inherent social organization that existed long before their learning group of 28 students was constituted as an English class. Some of these students attended the same pre-school. Some of these students have lived in the same neighbourhood for their entire lives. Some of their parents have associations that have pre-determined social relationships. Much of this hierarchy was built while students were in their developmental years, learning reading, writing, and math, playground cooperation and classroom survival. The students have created a drama around a sense of school smarts and social hierarchy. Although what has happened is not articulated by the students, they are still playing out parts that they took in those early years. It would be ambitious to think I could design activities that re-organize this social hierarchy, but in retrospect I see how I constructed learning activities for some of the marginalized students to find a vehicle that transported them from the margins into the center. For some students, their only need is a successful moment in which to build upon their strengths, gain recognition, and muster self confidence; this in turn redirects the learning cycle and repositions the student in school social structure.

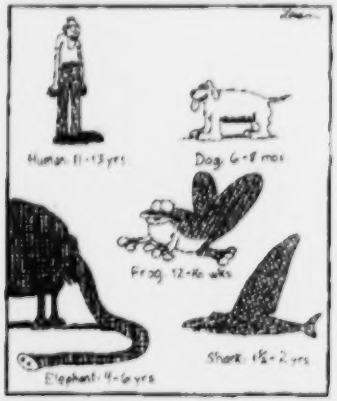
In hindsight, I see the importance of looking beyond gender, ethnicity and economic status in order to enlarge the circle, adding to our list the more subtle margins that our learning system has created. Howard Gardner, in *Frames of the Mind*, puts forth the theory of multiple intelligences, identifying them as linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, inter-personal, and intra-personal. Those students who do not have facility in mathematical and linguistic

intelligence, especially when expressed in written form, are usually out of the main stream of school culture. On occasion, we create an oral culture in the classroom, and new voices are heard and recognized. Other intelligence frames are often relegated to elective areas or extra curricular activities.

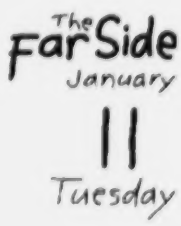
Poetry is a combination of linguistic and musical ability. Music, pervasive in youth culture, provides the common elements of language and culture within the world of youth and is thus a potent medium for learning across many of the boundaries existing in the classroom. As I see it now, the assignment described in the following pages created a zone between the spheres of school and social/private youth culture, and in that zone, some of the marginalized students could join the learning circle with full status. Extending the definition of marginality and designing more vehicles have been front and center in my work this year as a teacher-scholar.

Poetry from the Far Side[1]

The fluorescent lights were a startling contrast to a gray sky threatening but not promising a sunrise. The din of student conversations mixed with rustling notebook pages as last minute efforts were made to finish calculus assignments. My coat still hung on the back of my chair, and my once steaming cup of tea, half drunk and now cool, was a paper weight for my day's marking. Out there before me were grade 12 students waiting to learn what I could teach about poetry. My Far Side Calendar was a day behind, and to stall for time, I peeled away yesterday's chuckle to find my inspiration to begin class.



Awkward ages



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"Homework for tomorrow," I said, without consulting my daybook to refresh my memory "is to write a Far Side poem called 'Awkward Ages' using the boy, the dog, the frog, the elephant and the shark." I set my calendar on my desk so that students might look more closely at the drawings. And then, as if the television channel had changed, I continued the previous day's discussion of theme in Yeats' "Second Coming."

The next day 20 out of 26 students had poems in one form or other, and regardless of my agenda, we were going to study live poets that hour. As one student after another volunteered to read aloud a hand crafted poem, a common understanding of vulnerability set unspoken rules of respect and honour, and the class hierarchy changed before my eyes. While students read and talked about how they shaped their versions of Awkward Ages, there were no private snickering conversations, no disinterested members of the audience completing work for another subject and no reluctant readers.

Awkward Ages
with homage to the Far Side

Tears blur my puerile vision
as horrible aliens make my body their home
I drown in my naivete But escape the turbulent flow
With only a scratch and a few drops of blood
The very same blood that the baby shark
Under liquid velvet crests in his insipid home
But he, in his budding cadaver
Won't go outside and swim around
With other sharks of his same age
Who, as of yet, haven't reached his stage
In their two years
And right above, on a lily pad
A shy, twelve week-old frog is clad
In someone else, another creature's skin
He's not himself from outside in
And speaking of other creatures' skins
The wild brush hides this monster
Who can't construe why Mother Nature
Would ripen him in such a way
That his trunk, and laugh, I guess you may
Extends three feet from yesterday
Goes through the jungle and into the field

Where once a tiny pup did frolic
Now too big in ears and paws
Afraid to face the others' guffaws
He hides with us, confined to cages
While we outgrow our
Awkward ages

Libby Shumka

The assignment grew. I asked another grade 12 class to write this same poem, and they returned the next day yielding more plentiful results. It was evident that we had only begun to whet our appetites for poetry writing, so I assigned a revision for display in the classroom. Again, with the same abandon as the day this assignment was born, I added, "Write in 50 words or less on the back of your copy-ready, graphics-perfect poem why your poem deserves an A or a B." The students who had no poems cautiously inquired about their fate, and to them I replied, "Those who didn't write poems for today can write an additional 50-word override poem about why they didn't and why they deserve to be forgiven." The extra poem seemed judicious to everyone.

Animal crackers in my soup.
So detailed.
So precise.Yet they're also clumsy
Out of place
Waiting to grow into a body part or two.
Like an adolescent boy.
A tadpole almost a frog.
An elephant whose nose is 60 times his toes.
A shark who can't swim because he flips from his fin.
Those awkward ages.
Awkward stages.
Of the animal crackers.
In my soup

Kari Homeniuk

A week later students brought to class their final offerings. My marking box was rich with treasures. The words in the air had transformed into words on the page, and I still labored under the illusion that I'd assigned a self-marking assignment. Meanwhile, class analysis and discussion of poetry focused upon the poet's choice and placement of words—concepts usually too remote from the students' experiences; and I struggled for success when I tried to engage them in this aspect of poetry study. When asked to find a poem of their own choosing for assignments,

their criteria included an arresting and refreshing manipulation of words. The tenor of class discussions was different because students were reading and responding from a writer's stance.

Until this point I still believed that I had embarked on a journey involving some measure of risk. I had departed from the mainstream because I had spontaneously created an assignment based on the intuitive belief that students needed a bridge between studying poetry as a list of techniques to a study of the essence of the poetic process. My hope was to arrive at an understanding of these techniques and attributes as they appeared when the students themselves were trying to express or capture a thought or image.

At the time of its initial assignment, the Far Side poem was intended to be an exercise to engage students long enough to find some direction for the further study of poetry. I hadn't planned what I would do with the poems on the day of their arrival, but I was open to any possibility. At this point I realized I'd broken rules; I had done no mapping or scripting, but instead trusted the rapport I had with my students, my own background knowledge, and the pedagogical guidelines in my intellectual/professional knapsack to guide me through this uncharted terrain. The purpose, in retrospect, was to lead students to discover for themselves something about the word-crafting aspect of poem making, to cultivate an appreciation for poetry, and to validate their creative efforts.

Awkward Ages

Awkward Ages
Human adolescence
You are young,
You grow tall and bold,
A body like spaghetti,
Dandruff like confetti,
Semi-trailers at the bottom
You fumble,
You stumble,
Trying to take control.

Awkward Ages
No proportion,
Young pachyderm,
The trunk you carry is long
And drags,
Nothing but trouble;

You trip,
You stumble,
Trying to take control.
You could give someone
A shower
Miles away.

Awkward Ages
Master Grenouille.
There are miles of bog.
Those legs back there,
Give you power,
Go twice as far,
Missing destinations.
On second thought
They do look odd.
Don't be sad.

Awkward Ages
Those paws,
Like two-by-faws.
Big prints for little dog.
You fumble,
You stumble,
Trying to take control.

Awkward Ages
Just Phases.

Alfred Ball

My expectations for a quick marking session faded with the first poem I read. I read the first poem or two quickly, then shuffled through the stack to find one or two that were visually arresting. Then I hunted for more arresting visuals, and I was hooked. I read every word of every poem. I read to my husband and children to share the uncontainable joy I found in these words. Some poems compelled me to tell the stories about the marginal student who now revealed the poet's gift; the reluctant learner with the inaudible voice who was now released from some of his inhibitions; the student struggling to learn English as a second language who now had an opportunity to create imagery that transcended language barriers. My lesson and teaching objectives were fulfilled and fulfilling because I sensed an authenticity in the students' finished work.

Awkward Ages

As a child of 12 to 16 weeks
My limbs were useless, I was not neat
My manners wild, my temper vile
And so I was a frog.

As a child of 6 to 8 months
I grew in places and was curious
I was into everything, I ruined most anything
And so I was a dog.

As a child of 1 1/2 to 2 years
I began to stimulate fear
My weapons new, they thought me cute
And so I was a shark.

As a child of 4 to 6 years
I was soon their darling dear
My looks unfitting, My feet still growing
And so I was an elephant.

As a child of 11 to 13 years
I thought I noticed signs of a beard
My emotions strayed far, I wanted a car
And so I was a human.

Tina Chang

Honoring the students and their efforts was the next issue that I felt needed to be addressed. The students had given me more than a poem for a mark, and I could not leave this as a simple academic transaction. In assigning a graphics-ready presentation for display I had already half-asked their permission for publication. Initially I had in mind a wall display in the classroom for a month; here the students and perhaps a small circle of friends would come into the classroom for a look-see. But I began to contemplate a larger, yet still friendly, audience: the showcase in the school's formal entrance. Here school officials, parents, official visitors, couriers and unknown younger students could read and perhaps mutter about these enlightening reflections on their own teen-age experience. The school annual crossed my mind as a publication that would forever fix a week of school for posterity: memories of putting off

studying for the math cross-grade exam to write a poem;the moment when a skater with typical baggy pants and skull cap read with a poet's voice and turned some heads; a genuine assignment that caught everyone off guard. I wanted to celebrate these kids for their trust in an article for other colleagues who might share the joy that we all shared for a week while we had a wee peek behind the adolescent mask thick with sociological pancake make up. At best it could only be a series of snapshots.

Awkward Ages

Pigeon toed pocket protecting cramped the
possibility of style, buck toothed bean breath
equals sympathetic awe wherever
confrontations spark. Canis chewalotis;
paws awkwardly romping stomping in a
miscellaneous fashion; cowling in background
where cheap pillow fuzz and moccasin
remains scattered. A near swallowing of
tongue. Virgin emerald legs say leap the
mind says confusion; I be large, weaning
from mama, clumsily knocking, falling
whining with an elephantalius honk. Large
but still pathetic moving awkwardly will
attempt forgetfulness knowing the impossibility,
while tough skin and a mind half
on the path of destruction and half
somewhere else though sleeking
stealthily through the ocean dwelling
still will fight clumsily through these
vulnerable years.

Matthew Griffin

Consulting the students turned out to be the best strategy, and they preferred the showcase in the formal entrance as their publication venue. As it was now the week to compile report card portfolios, I found students were including their poetry-writing experience as evidence of creative writing, literary study, and trying something new. Some named it as the most significant assignment for the term. Those who had made "the final cut," as they affectionately called it, wrote even more on their portfolio assessment reflection sheets. It was, as I thought, the centerpiece of their poetry study. Many students encouraged me to write this

article, which I said I had drafted concurrently to reading their poetry repeatedly over the weekend. The literary editor of the school annual came to see me about selecting some of these poems to be published in the annual. He too made a final cut.

When I turned over the poems to record their self-evaluation mark, I found still more to read and evaluate. Rather than routine and often mundane reasons for an A or a B, I found more evidence of students studying poetry from the point of view of the poet. Their 50-word mark justification statements told about their insight into the process of poetry, and in some cases, they demonstrated a consolidation of their literary knowledge.

> The poem "The Flowering" should be highly noted—(A). First, the poet (myself) took a great amount of time to combine a poem in such a way that honesty and creative thinking are reflected in this piece of literature. Analytically the poem's imagery and intensive manner seem to flow quite nicely with its originality and poetic rhyme scheemingly presentation. *Elliott Mao Wright*

> Attempting to compress the given information and my own ideas into a sonnet form was a challenging task, and I feel that I have done well considering that I am not a gifted poet. Except for a few errors in the scansion, the structure is good (EVEN Shakespeare made mistakes). I feel I deserve an A for my effort, and the amount of work I put into this assignment. I wrote two different sonnets before coming up with this one. *Michelle Garcia*

> After observing the cartoon, "Far Side," with a fresh perspective, I was able to generate a central theme for my poem; human intelligence makes our awkward ages more complicated than in the case of animals. Throughout the poem, I looked for pairs of common vocabulary that could rhyme and created meaningful stanza around them which contains vivid arguments in bolstering my theme. This poem best demonstrates my technique in writing rhyming poetry, and I think that it deserves an A. *Troy Yang*

In the final phase of my assessment of this far-sided poetry assignment, it wasn't that easy to record A, B and C+ in my mark book, sift out the poems to publish in the showcase, photocopy those I wanted for the

article I was now writing, put them in a folder to return, and go on to study drama.

I'd come to believe that I owed my students more than the routine closure of a class activity. At first I began a letter to the class, to share my thoughts, my criteria, and my joy, and to thank them. In my mind I shaped my reply around Tom Romano's criteria which I handed out when students wanted to know the basis for their marks:

> I am looking for writing that works, the same thing I anticipate when I open a novel, take a first plunge into a poem or begin an editorial . . . . I hope to be knocked out, floored, bowled over, and generally wowed.
>
> I'm looking for information that makes me crave more information, gives it to me, and then makes a point.
>
> I'm looking for surprises of language and vision.
>
> I'm looking for vivid images.
>
> I'm looking for rhythms of language and voice.
>
> I'm looking for an adept employment of some naturally evolved form that might even prompt me to utter aloud my appreciation as I sit alone reading (Romano 1987, 114).

My notes were shallow compared to the poetry I had been reading; they were too teacherly and did not ring true. I needed to validate and honour their risk taking; and then with the same word-smithing, risk-taking, and absurd vulnerability, I took pen in hand and began my own poem. By the end of the evening, I had drafted several versions, and finally by morning I'd settled on an edition to include in the showcase for all the students, strangers, and staff to see. My heart on my sleeve, I was in there teaching because I was willing to be a learner too.

Image Journey

> Risking the absurd vulnerability,
> unguarded and unmasked
> revelations transform the mundane hour into image journeys
> departing for uncharted educational terrain
> beyond predictability
> to defy the schoolroom's marks, grades, ranks and rightness,
> scrambling the hierarchy to liberate the age of awkwardness.

Notes

1. This piece originally appeared as "Poetry from the Far Side: Risking the Absurd Vulnerability," in *English Journal*, December 1994. Copyright 1994 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

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The Overwhelming Question: Integrating The ACLS Curriculum Project, "Teaching for Understanding," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Joan S. Soble

"So how should I presume? . . . And how should I begin?" J. Alfred Prufrock asked this, and so did I when I found myself wondering how I was using my sabbatical year. My plan as a teacher-scholar had been three-fold: to work with my colleagues to further their understanding and implementation of the "Teaching for Understanding" curriculum framework;[1] to enrich my "Bible as Literature" class curriculum through a combination of travel and study; and to read about religion and comparative religion with the idea of developing a religion and literature course for next year.

Almost immediately, the original plan changed when I had to figure out how to ensure that my "Reading and Writing on Human Values" students would not be educationally shortchanged while I was traveling in Israel. When I realized that Betsy Grady, last year's teacher fellow, was free during the class period that "Reading and Writing on Human Values" met, I began to speculate: what if Betsy and I were to work together to devise an interdisciplinary unit around "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"? Because our ACLS seminar had already begun to instill in me the notion of the inseparability of the historical moment and the work of literature, I had realized that I did not want to teach Eliot's poem again without deepening my own understanding of industrialization and World War I (Betsy's favorite war!). Furthermore, I saw in Betsy's and my collaboration the chance to model for our colleagues the way in which the "Teaching for Understanding" framework could help one to plan and implement an interdisciplinary unit that (1) showed the importance of looking through a number of disciplinary lenses in order to create deep, personal understandings of complex materials and ideas and (2) honored and demonstrated the particular questions, conventions, and concerns of the separate disciplines. On the most practical level, my work with Betsy would afford my class the chance to work with an excellent and inspired humanities teacher rather than a substitute teacher who might have many overwhelming questions about "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

So over a period of about four weeks, Betsy and I met regularly to discuss the meaning of the poem, develop "understanding goals" and

the "understanding performances" that the students could create to show their understandings, select the most "generative" readings and videotapes to establish the historical moment, and devise the freewrite assignments ("ongoing assessment" pieces) that would enable us to know what the students were understanding." Because both of us were intrigued by the notion of students as scholars, we designed a mid-unit research project: through the examination of primary and secondary texts, pairs of students would become authorities on single important allusions in the poem and would ultimately grapple with the question of how their specific allusions affected their overall understanding of the poem. In addition, the class as a whole would create a Prufrock exhibition: as a final demonstration of their understandings, they would produce a huge, annotated version of the poem which would be displayed at the Pilot School Arts Open House in the middle of January. Needless to say, we were very excited to be creating a series of student activities and performances which would give students the experience of being scholars and yield a memorable product representative of individual and collective student academic achievement and reflection on meaning.

As we were working away at this, I began to realize that I wasn't doing very much reading about Islam. Did this constitute a failure on my part? Was I making the mistake of sacrificing my sabbatical experience, my chance to explore a particular academic area for the sheer joy of it? I struggled with these questions because even though the books in my bookcase beckoned and the quiet of the library was enticing, my conversations with Betsy and the time I spent listening to Britten's "War Requiem" were at the moment more exciting. Did I dare to give myself permission to delve into Prufrock really deeply? The last time I had done so was during my junior year of college when I'd written my junior tutorial paper on it. And yet this interdisciplinary, interpersonal experience was nothing like that.

My trip to Israel created an upheaval in both my spiritual and professional lives. I left Cambridge with great curiosity about how the class would initially receive "Prufrock" and then became completely immersed in the contiguousness of the ancient and modern in Israel and the diversity and primacy of religious life as symbolized by the deliberate ways in which many people dressed. But the clothes that most haunted my memory were the military uniforms worn by so many talking, laughing young men and women who are not much older than my own students. A day or two after my return home, I wept as I read the World War I materials Betsy had assigned to my class. Young soldiers are young soldiers anywhere, and I understood that I knew something about war

that I'd never known before, even if there was much I had to learn.

And then there was my "Reading and Writing on Human Values" class with which to contend. No matter how artfully a unit is planned and how well students know and respect the substitute teacher, there's always a re-entry process when the "real teacher" comes back after an absence. The fact that "Prufrock" was proving elusive and even more complex daily did not further endear me to them. But we plodded on. During my first few days back in school, figuring out how to present the "student-as-scholar" piece of the curriculum proved to be so time-consuming that I opted not to attend the lectures I equated with being on sabbatical. What was I doing with my time, and what was I supposed to be doing?

And then there were my colleagues, many of whom were working on creating understanding performances and the units associated with them. Because their drafts of their understanding goals, understanding performances, and related ongoing assessments were due within the week and because I was somewhat out of touch with their progress and their understanding of the "Teaching for Understanding" framework, I decided to meet with each of them individually. I hoped to work with them on their pieces-in-progress and then allow myself adequate time to reflect on where they were and what they needed next. A conscientious plan, no doubt—but still none of the sitting in the library that had characterized my sabbatical time in early October.

In my bookbag was *The Word of Islam*, but I was sitting at the computer in the Pilot School office writing up my notes on my conferences with my colleagues. I wasn't resenting it, though. The geometry teacher was developing materials that would require her class to create "reflection drawings," so we'd spent time talking about the power of reflection and the many possible and all relevant meanings of the word "reflection." The first-year Spanish teacher was struggling to find ways to make his students see the interrelatedness of culture and language and the centrality of language to meaning-making. A Language Arts teacher was crafting a project which would allow his students to explore the relationship between multiple voices and individual identity, first in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and then in their own lives. All of my colleagues were deeply involved in helping their students to understand themselves, others, and the many worlds in which they live. If I was helping to facilitate any of this, wasn't I doing at least some of the work of someone who has been given the opportunity to participate in a humanities curriculum project? And wasn't it good to feel connected to my colleagues and the commitments of my school even if I was on a partial sabbatical?

Still, I don't think I'd be recording any of the above reflections had

it not been for two conversations I had with students one morning. It was the first day of student research into the assigned "Prufrock" allusions. I'd imagined that my role would be to facilitate learning: if I provided students with adequate materials, they'd come to the understandings I'd already achieved. So I was surprised when I learned something from one of my students right away. I'd directed Mari's attention to part of a chapter in "Ecclesiastes" which I'd thought most important to the poem; she'd read further than I'd suggested, however, and asked me if Prufrock's assertion that he "should have been a pair of ragged claws" might be Eliot's reference to the the 3:19 statement that "a man hath not preeminence above a beast." And I, who'd always seen those ragged claws only as a reference to *Hamlet*, saw them anew and recognized in them the human quest to understand one's place in the universe.

About an half-hour later, I was standing with Louisy, another student, at the photocopy machine, where I was copying both the canto from Dante's *Inferno* from which the epigraph of the poem is drawn and an essay about Dante in his own time. When I mentioned that the essay included some discussion of Beatrice, whom our whole class had discussed in relation to *Demian*, her comment was, "So we've got a love poem that is happening in hell. Maybe love is hell. And war is hell." I wish Betsy, who'd been asking me all week if the kids had understood what she'd taught about the historical moment, had been standing there. As for me, I realized that I'd been so caught up in my own view of Prufrock as the figure of Dante's fraudulent counselor that I'd totally neglected to wonder if perhaps Prufrock was the lovesick Dante himself.

So I wish to thank Betsy, Mari, and Louisy for teaching me how to read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." When I began my sabbatical, I hadn't imagined that part of my work would be to explore this poem I believed I already knew so well. And yet here I was embroiled in this intersection of old voices, new voices, and numerous texts, learning right along with my students and my colleagues. As I write this, it's only November; so I'm hoping that Prufrock's assertion that "There will be time, there will be time" proves for me to be a truth rather than an indication of procrastination and lost opportunity. I still hope and plan to read widely about world religions and biblical interpretations, but it's time for me to stop feeling that I've been neglecting my sabbatical and to honor and recognize the new understandings that have come my way through the collaborations, conversations, situations, and reflection time that this grant-program "time off" has fostered and even created.

Just the other day, I was talking about personal narratives and autobiography with Rob Riordan, a teacher fellow during the first year of the ACLS K-12 project, and Paul Fideler, one of the university fellows

who's been part of the Harvard-Brookline-Cambridge collaboration since the project began. As I spoke to Paul about how my students were studying "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and how they'd eventually be writing spiritual autobiographies, Paul commented that in writing and sharing their autobiographies, my students were being asked to do precisely what Prufrock was doing: "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." This piece of writing is my attempt to prepare my sabbatical face. And while I don't believe I'll have time "for a hundred visions and revisions," I firmly believe that this face will and must change many times over the course of this sabbatical journey. I hope I have the courage and imagination to let it happen.

Notes

1. We'd begun to work with the "Teaching for Understanding" curriculum framework last spring in a five-session mini-course. Our new schedule this year allowed us to continue this exploration during the school day once every eight days.
2. The terms in quotation marks are the four key concepts of the "Teaching for Understanding" curriculum framework.

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A Matter of Trust

Richard Young

I have always been a voracious reader, thinking of it as my vocation and avocation, my business and my pleasure. Ever since the days when I realized that the baseball books of John R. Tunis were not really great literature, I have known *how* to read, looking for subtlety in narration, grace in the use of language, complexity of character. Even so, the ACLS seminar was a revelation for me because of its profound effect on the way I read.

When Helen Vendler came as a guest speaker to our seminar, her presentation of poetry was a turning point for me. Vendler, the George F. Kennan Professor of Poetry at Harvard, led a discussion of the authority and ambiguity of the narrative voice in poems. The ramifications of that discussion stayed with me long after her visit.

First of all, I was taken with her method. A week before her visit, we had received a packet of seemingly disparate poetry from her, poems that had the language of English in common but seemingly little else. They were from all eras, by both men and women. Some used traditional forms and some depended on the shape for meaning. During the week, I read them carefully, and made notes in the margins.

When Vendler arrived at the seminar, she started talking about the poetry even as she was removing her coat, breathless from a climb up the stairs. She read the poems in their turn, or rather recited them from memory as we read along, stopped for comments and discussion, listened intently to our comments, responded. At one point someone asked about pedagogy when dealing with poetry. The questioner said that students sometimes approached poetry with trepidation at best, fear and loathing at worst. Vendler's answer was a good one, I think. Every poem in English was written under the rules of English and it was meant to communicate—and if the poet were skillful, that meaning would come clear. Often we exacerbate the sense of distance and difficulty in poetry by approaching it as if it were somehow *up there*, mysterious and sacred, while teachers act as keepers of the flame. Vendler told us that she reveals everything she can about a poem to her students, without making them guess at what she's thinking: the poem's diction and grammar, its context both historical and biographical, possible themes. She reads the poem aloud the first time they encounter it and asks that they read along silently. In telling all, she gives the students the power they need in dealing with a particular poem. Ultimately, that doesn't

change the fact that poems can still be full of ambiguities and confusion for students—but part of our role as teachers is to help students cut through to what is important about the poem.

During the course of the seminar that day, we worked together on several "difficult" poems using this method. The discussion was powerful and thought-provoking, often centering on reasons why a poet had used a particular voice or why he or she had chosen a certain form or one word rather than another. It always came back to what the poets were trying to communicate and the reasons why we thought they chose to do so. Occasionally, poems that had seemed innocuous on first reading or even on my close reading during the week took on a new meaning that day, becoming instruments of power.

One poem in particular stayed with me and helped me clarify my thoughts about narration as I read and worked in the seminar, as I thought about my project and the nature of history as narrative, as I worked on literature with my students, and as I thought about my own writing. Somehow, Vendler had cast a small pebble on the water and the ripples moved gently through everything in my work during the year. The poem was Robert Lowell's "Father's Room." When I read it on my own, I had thought of it as a slice of time, a poem of place, something quaint and evocative about the life of his father—and little else. Vendler's wonderful explication made me think of some other questions, questions that had been common enough for me to ask my students regarding fiction but which might not have seemed appropriate in examining a poem that was putatively "true." Who is telling this? Why? Where? What reasons might he or she have for leaving something out? For including some specific detail? Why that detail and not some other?

Father's Room

In my Father's bedroom
blue threads as thin
as pen-writing on the bedspread,
blue dots on the curtains,
a blue kimono,
Chinese sandals with blue plush straps.
The broad-planked floor
had a sandpapered neatness.
The clear glass bed-lamp
with a white doily shade
was still raised a few
inches by resting on volume two

of Lafcadio Hearn's
Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan.
Its warped olive cover
was punished like a rhinoceros hide.
In the fly leaf:
"Robbie from Mother."
Years later in the same hand:
"This book has had hard usage
on the Yangtze River, China.
It was left under an open
porthole in a storm."

Robert Lowell

Perhaps the most important question I had to ask myself was the question of belief in a narrator. The answer has something to do with my sense of myself as one of the two subjective players in a dynamic interaction between the writer and the reader. In other words, I had to trust myself as a reader, perhaps a quirky one, but as a reader who values his own opinion based on his own experience, both in reading and in life. Using Lowell as an example, I found that I absolutely trusted the poor sick person who narrates "Skunk Hour," because somehow he slices close to the bone truth. Similarly, Lowell tells us something fundamental about the American character in "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" and "After the Surprising Conversions," as he does in "For the Union Dead." I believe *those* voices, but not the narrator of an elegiac poem such as "Father's Room." I won't try to reprise everything that was said at the seminar about the poem, because I don't think I could do Vendler justice, but will say that I came away thinking that this was a curious way indeed to write about a father who has just died. Why include the details about the silk kimono or the delicate blue thread? The doily shade and the admonishing statement from mother?

In part, the answer lies with something that any famous poet knows about his/her verse, expressed best by Shakespeare when he wrote the *Sonnets*: that only his verse would keep his lover alive [Sonnet 18: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."]. Lowell knew the same thing about his standing as a poet in relation to the importance of his own father's life; in other words, that if his father achieved immortality it could only come in Lowell's poetry. Lowell shows a man who is complacent in a life that is not his own, defeated from beginning to end. It's the room of a man dominated and soft: blue threads, doily shade, the robe, a book with a chastising remark

from his mother, the domination complete, child and man, son and husband.

I went home thinking, Why tell this? I read more about Lowell in Vendler's own work, *Voices and Visions* and *The Music of What Happens* and in Ian Hamilton's powerful biography, *Robert Lowell*. I found a Robert Lowell who once knocked his father down with a punch, who was told by his psychiatrist that he was unwanted. This same psychiatrist, incidentally, may have been the lover of Lowell's mother. This was the same Robert Lowell who was told by his own mother that when she was pregnant with him, she would walk by the ocean saying "I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead." This was the Lowell, who said of himself when he was a child, "I wasn't a child at all . . . but felt like Agrippina in the Golden House of Nero."

After the death of his mother, Lowell wrote in his poem, "Sailing Home from Rapallo," that she was a "corpse wrapped like *panettone* in Italian tinfoil." Hmm. Try to think of Mrs. Lowell in another way *now*. An axe is being ground here—and then planted deep in someone's skull. How can we trust someone who seems so desperate to get even? We can't even guess at all of the other complexities in Lowell's relationship with his parents, but we do know what he chooses to tell us when they have died. I, for one, find it suspect.

After the Vendler seminar, a larger question kept haunting me: Do we trust any narrator who is writing about him- herself? I have always felt skeptical, especially when someone polemicizes—and I think a close reading is in order not only in poetry but in any narrative form. During our seminar we read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In the course of our reading, I came across a stunning anecdote in the epilogue. Alex Haley writes about Malcolm turning manuscript pages until he comes to a part about how Malcolm had kept his burglary gang in line in the days when he was a criminal in Boston. The narrative in the body of the autobiography has Malcolm showing himself to be the toughest of the tough by playing Russian roulette and forcing the others who refused to play to back down (142-43). Yet, in Haley's epilogue, we see Malcolm laughing and saying that maybe that part should be removed because he was "bluffing" and had palmed the bullet. Eventually, Malcolm decides the story should stay in the autobiography, despite its being false. Keep in mind that Malcolm never knew the book would be printed with Haley's epilogue—that he was willing to let the lie stand.

Haley does something extraordinary here, implicitly telling us all to beware of autobiography, of what someone chooses to tell us about himself. Think about it in the context of another story told by Malcolm X about himself: he tells us that he taught himself to read in prison, using

the dictionary and beginning with "aardvark." A good story, now very famous—and often quoted. Yet earlier in the same autobiography, he tells us that he got all A's in eighth grade and was the top student in his class in Michigan. I have taught eighth grade and I know that the top student in an eighth grade class is a fairly sophisticated reader, certainly not one who needs to learn to read again at the age of twenty.

Does all of this mean that the book is a lie and should not be read with students? No, but I think it is a valuable lesson for them in the nature of narration. It is valuable to ask why a person chooses certain stories when telling his/her own story, especially when that story is a polemic. This man's co-biographer admits that Malcolm's cause was more important than the fine points of truth, but that in itself doesn't make his cause any less true. People tell us stories for a reason. Malcolm's is clear. The value of Malcolm's story lies in the undisputable fact that Malcolm was once a con man who rose to greatness through a belief in a higher power and an understanding that honor and self-respect were greater than any riches. If he embellishes or mythologizes, we have to accept that he does so for a good cause—a cautionary tale in which he uses the authority of his life on the streets and in prison to reach young people who are headed down the same path he once took.

The Russian roulette story and the aardvark story both carry a message to those kids: "Don't do what I did. Value education. Learn to read, then read. Learn. Believe. Make yourself better and do it now." And yet I think we are obliged as teachers to deal with anything we find to be suspect in his or any other narrative. To do otherwise would be disingenuous, or worse, dismissive of Malcolm's complex nature and his life.

I have another reason for feeling this way about narration, and that is that I am a writer. I once wrote a story about a friend of mine for the Brookline Foundation publication, *Reflections*. When we both returned from Vietnam, my friend Eric slowly deteriorated and finally ended up an alcoholic on the streets. I was powerless to help him. It was a good piece, I think, and fairly moving. At one time, I might have told you that it was an honest piece—but in the spirit of what I am saying about Malcolm X and Robert Lowell and about my reading of history for my project, I will tell you now that I really don't know if any of it is true. Much of memory is on rails. And I am not sure anymore if I told Eric's story, or if I am remembering my telling of a story I have thought about and told often.

I know there is a great deal of truth in the story, but I don't really know anymore what I remember about Vietnam or about Eric or about his descent. From writing our story, I do know that autobiography is skewed, varnished. It has gaps, intentional and otherwise. The story is

embellished to make the teller look good. I can say that I hadn't really thought about the truth of my friend for twenty years until one early morning at the ACLS meeting in Rancho Mirage, on a day when I was to present my part of the Brookline Cambridge report on the seminar and the effect it had on our lives. I woke and saw so many things I had left unsaid. I had ignored much of what was painful. Gone were many of my sins of omission and commission. I had 'corrected' some things that I really could not change. I made myself look better than I had been. Most of this had come at my friend's expense. I had never intended to tell a lie in my narration, but I didn't tell the truth. I can tell you now that this much *is* true: a great deal of narration is too humiliating to repeat, except to yourself in the deepest, darkest recesses of the soul at four in the morning. Then it's hard not to be honest.

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